

CANDLE LIGHTING

8:45 PM

Friday · Erev Shabbos

PIRKEI AVOS

Ch. 4

Who is Wise?

SHABBOS ENDS

9:59 PM

Motzaei Shabbos · Sat night

The Final Push.

A PERSONAL ACCOUNT BY **RABBI BORUCH MERKUR**



Rabbi Avrohom Lipskier (left) by the Rebbe at Sunday Dollars. "Reb Lipskier saved a generation."

The first time I went by the Rebbe, it was Gimmel Tammuz 5754 (1994).

I was learning at Tiferes Bachurim in Morristown that summer. One of the students woke us all up at dawn — *it's happening*, he said. Meaning, Moshiach. I'm pretty sure I drove the van in. I didn't make it to the Ohel in Queens; I caught a lift back to the yeshiva instead.

But before that, in 770, the Rebbe was in his room. Under a white sheet lay his holy body. The room looked otherwise empty, as they had used the Rebbe's own table to build the *aron*, the casket. The secretaries moved me along quickly, the way they used to move people through Sunday Dollars. I came out the other side of that room dazed and confused, with no idea what I had just seen.

That was my introduction. A *bochur*, a yeshiva student, of twenty-three, in from yeshiva in Morristown, never having had the opportunity to get close

enough to see the Rebbe before.

I want to write honestly about that day, because I think we have been telling the post-Gimmel-Tammuz story for thirty-two years in one key only: the triumphant key. The numbers-are-up key, where we point to how Chabad has multiplied since 1994. But there was more in the air that morning. The pain. The bewilderment. The torn lapels of mourning walking past dancing chassidim. The daughter of the Rebbe's emissary, herself a *shlucha*, who hosted me in Crown Heights, telling me with complete certainty that this whole *levaya*, the funeral, was simply the Rebbe's way of gathering all his shluchim in one place for the immediate revelation of Moshiach. And me, crushed, not even making it to the Ohel.

I want to honor the wound. And then I want to tell you what I think the venomous wound is for.

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Every Mood at Once

Gimmel Tammuz 5754 in Crown Heights is hard to describe to anyone who wasn't there. In front of the stairwell down to the shul of 770, someone had set up a full fruit stand and was giving fruit away for free — grapes and figs, dates and almonds — to add joy in the street. There were chassidim dancing. And walking past those same chassidim were other chassidim with their Shabbos kapotas, their long coats, rent with the *keriah* of mourning, heads down, eyes red.

It was not one mood. It was every mood, simultaneously, on the same block.

And somewhere in the middle of all of it, I was standing in a line snaking through the shul and up to the Rebbe's office for the first time in my life.

How Did the Rebbe React to Yud Shvat?

Within a day or two of Gimmel Tammuz, Rabbi Avrohom Lipskier, the celebrated chassid and founder of Tiferes Bachurim, came into the classroom and gave his devastated students a *likut*, a compilation of the Rebbe's teachings. Its method was simple and almost surgical: take the Rebbe's own response to the passing of the Previous Rebbe, following Yud Shvat 5710, and lay it side by side with the moment we were in.

The argument was: we have been here before. The Rebbe himself taught us, in his own words and his own actions, how to react when a Rebbe is no longer revealed in the body. He published the *sichos*, the talks. He demanded the spreading of Chassidus go faster. He said *Yaakov Avinu lo meis*, "Jacob our father did not die." He said the connection only deepens.

Here we had a working set of instructions written by the Rebbe himself for exactly this situation. It said: here is what you do now. And what you do is exactly what you were doing before, only more.

Rabbi Avrohom Lipskier saved a generation. To convey how bewildered we were: the week of Gimmel Tammuz, a therapist pressed his business card into my hand at the Ohel, as if it were a given that Lubavitchers were already on the way to depression. But Reb Lipskier gave us a *sefer ha'avoda*, a structured order of spiritual work to uplift us — pages of inspiration and guidance to learn from.

Tightening the Straps of Hiskashrus

In the months leading up to Gimmel Tammuz, the *chozer* Reb Yoel Kahn, *a"h* — the official repeater of the Rebbe's talks, who had transcribed the Rebbe's lengthy *sichos* from memory for over forty years — said something so strong that people who heard it never forgot it. If there was a "Gimmel Tammuz," meaning if our sun stopped — Heaven forbid — you could throw away your tefillin.

He meant it as the highest possible expression of certainty. He meant it as fuel for faith. He meant: *I am so sure this will not happen that I am betting the most basic mitzvah of a Jew on it.*

And then Gimmel Tammuz came.

I want us to be honest about how brutally Reb Yoel's statement landed on the morning after. It was meant to galvanize *emunah*, faith. Yet for a day, for a week, for some people much longer, it became the heaviest possible challenge to *emunah*.

A Jew's tefillin are not invalidated by a delay in geulah. A Jew's avodah is not invalidated by histalkus. We did not throw them away. We tightened the straps.

But here is what thirty-two years have proven: a Jew's tefillin are not invalidated by a delay in *geulah*, the redemption. A Jew's *avodah*, his service, is not invalidated by *histalkus*. The fact that we have continued to put on tefillin every morning of every one of these thirty-two years (including Gimmel Tammuz 5754 itself, and every Gimmel Tammuz since), is, in a way, the very answer to his statement. He was challenging us. We did not throw them away. We tightened the straps.

The Sun Stopped, and the Decree That Was Already Rescinded

This year Gimmel Tammuz falls in the week of Parshas Korach, the weekly Torah portion, and there are two things the Rebbe brings out on Korach in his *Dvar Malchus*, that strike with haunting precision this day.

One is the sun stopping. Time itself bends mid-sky; the clock that should have moved on holds its breath. And here is the detail almost too precise to be coincidence: according to Seder Olam Rabbah (ch. 11), the day Yehoshua stopped the sun at Givon was Gimmel Tammuz itself. The same day. The Rebbe brought this parallel out himself, more than once, in his Gimmel Tammuz *sichos*.

The other is the decree that was rescinded, though it looked like the opposite. In 5687 (1927) the Previous Rebbe was arrested by the Yevsektzia, the Communist Party's Jewish section. He was sentenced to death. Under international pressure the sentence was commuted: first to ten years of hard labor in Solovki, then to three years of exile in Kostroma. On the ground it looked like the catastrophe kept worsening: leader of Russian Jewry, to prisoner, to labor camp, to exile. What chassidim could not see was that the death sentence had already been rescinded in Heaven, and it happened on Gimmel Tammuz, which the Rebbe later termed the Holiday of Redemption. They knew only the exile. They did not know they were already past the worst of it. Yud-Beis Tammuz, the twelfth of Tammuz (July 1927) — the day the Frierdiker Rebbe was notified he was a free man — only confirmed below what was already true above.

And then there is what fell to us: Gimmel Tammuz 5754 itself. It feels, looking back, like a forced injection of venom at the exact moment our feet were about to give out from the pain of the Rebbe's second stroke, which struck that winter on the 27th of Adar. A pain so total and so new — one has to ask: what is a wound like that for? I want to illustrate this with a true story.

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Fire Ants



Yossi Ghinsberg, photographed shortly after his rescue from the Bolivian Amazon, 1981.

In 1981 an Israeli backpacker named Yossi Ghinsberg was lost alone in the Bolivian Amazon for three weeks. By the final week he was skin and bone. He had nothing left to scavenge, and his feet, wet for so many days that the skin had come off the soles, were beyond walking. “They were just chunks of exposed flesh,” he later said in an interview. “I couldn’t take the pain.” He had reached the point where the body refuses. Not *won’t*. *Can’t*.

Pain like a wall.

What he did next he tells in a remarkably flat voice in every interview he has given: he shook a tree full of fire ants over his own head, just to have a louder pain to drown out his feet. The ants rained down. He let them bite. And then, in his words: “The waves of pain and adrenaline distracted me from my feet.” He got up. He kept walking. Not far, not gracefully. But enough. Enough that when, days later, his friend Kevin Gale came back upriver with a Bolivian boatman to look for him, Yossi was still moving along the bank — barely. They saw him from the water. They pulled him in. He was days, perhaps hours, from death.

The mechanism is what to dwell on, and Ghinsberg is unusually clear-eyed about it. He does not describe what he did as a feat of willpower or a summoning of inner strength. He describes it as a substitution: one pain to drown out another. The feet had become a closed loop of agony he could not override by deciding to. So he opened a second, louder channel, and rode the adrenaline of the new pain to make his body move. He did not *decide* to be brave. He decided to be bitten, and the bravery came free with the package. The strength came from outside, not from inside.

This is the *mashal*, the parable, I want to leave you with.

The Rebbe has led us, for decades, in a march toward Moshiach. To open our eyes. To insist on *geulah*. For almost forty years of *nesius*, his leadership, our feet held up: our *ratzon*, our *emunah*, our *koach* — our will, our faith, our strength. We marched.

And then came the strokes — the first on 27 Adar 5752, the second exactly two years later on 27 Adar 5754. The Rebbe did not stop marching (he did

not, and does not), but we could not bear what was happening to him, and to us. Our feet gave out. The body refused. Pain like a wall.

And on Gimmel Tammuz 5754, Hashem shook a tree of fire ants onto our head. The bewilderment of that morning. The torn kapote walking past the man dancing. The free fruit no one knew how to taste. Reb Yoel’s words landing the wrong way. The twenty-three-year-old bochur with a therapist’s business card in his pocket. The thirty-two years of being asked, every single morning, to keep walking when our feet could not.

It is new pain, in a new place. It is not the old pain of a *galus*, an exile, we had grown numb to. It is a fresh, screaming, full-nervous-system pain that does not let us settle, does not let us sit down, does not let us close our eyes.

Forcing us out of this dark jungle across the last stretch of exile — the bite arrived first at the head, who absorbs what his people cannot bear.

It reaches us, and pushes us to give a final heave of our bodies in the *ikvesa d’Meshicha*, the Heels of Moshiach, the final and lowest generation before he arrives — forcing us out of this dark jungle across the last stretch of exile.

Thirty-two years later, the sun is still standing still over Givon. The decree, on the highest level, was rescinded long ago. We have been told. We are waiting only to see.

Until we are, the ants on our shoulders are doing their work. Each year that we keep walking is another step. Each Gimmel Tammuz we honor the wound, and the push of our newfound pain pushes us forward.

The Veil Lifted

The first time I went by the Rebbe, a sheet covered him. May this be the very last Gimmel Tammuz with anything between us and him. The Navi, the prophet, promises (Yeshayahu 30:20): “Your Teacher shall no longer be covered from you, and your eyes shall behold your Teacher.” The covering comes off.

Our Rebbeim teach (in the name of the Zohar and brought down through-out Chassidus) that the opening act of the *geulah* is the rising of the *tzaddikim*, the righteous. *Hakitzu v’ranenu shochnei afar* — “awake and sing, you who dwell in the dust.” The *tzaddikim* get up first, at the very onset of Moshiach, and at the head of them, leading the procession, our Rebbe.

The veil is lifted. The line is moving once again. We walk into the room — and this time, we meet his eyes: the kindest, the gentlest, the most powerful eyes we could ever hope to behold.

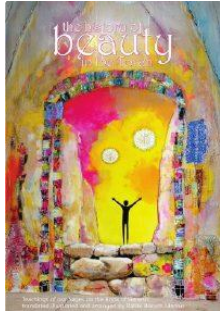
SOURCES

Talmud Avodah Zarah 25a · Seder Olam Rabbah ch. 11 · Dvar Malchus, Parshas Korach · Sicha Gimmel Tammuz 5710 · Yossi Ghinsberg, memoir first published in Hebrew (1985), English as Back from Tuichi (1993), later editions titled Jungle / Lost in the Jungle; dramatized in the 2017 film Jungle; and Ghinsberg’s published interviews.

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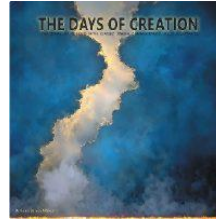
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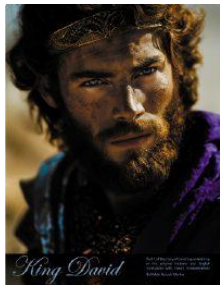


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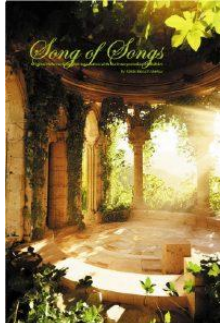


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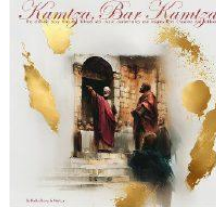


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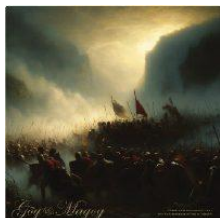


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